

King Crackpot

In 1984 (I mean the 1984 year in my life, not the Orwell book) I was working as an actor in a drama team for the Children's World charity in Glastonbury, Somerset. We worked with children who had severe learning disabilities.

The team leader was a woman called Judith Scott who said that, in terms of drama, she followed the teachings of Dorothy Heathcote.

Judith believed that kings and queens, princes and princesses were absolutely essential to children's drama. On that matter we disagreed and that did make life difficult. Judith knew that I was reading a lot of anarchist literature in those days, such as "Mutual Aid" by Peter Kropotkin, so she cast me, ironically, in the role of King Crackpot, King of the Land of Sunshine.

Every week we visited schools throughout Somerset and Bristol and Bath performing the story of King Crackpot and the Land of Sunshine. We rewrote the story for each school to make it possible for the children to join in. We always needed to think in positive terms relating to the ability ranges of the children. Always arranging the story according to the abilities which the children did have, rather than the abilities they didn't have.

The structure was always built around a fictional character who had some sort of problem to be overcome and the children were invited to help the character to succeed. The process of helping was structured so that there were movement exercises, communication exercises and opportunities for fun and creativity.

In tea breaks and planning sessions Judith tried to win me over to her political philosophy that kings and princes were necessary to give society structure, to inspire children with glitz and glamour and acts of dragon slaying heroism, ritual, tradition etc. I wasn't buying it.

I continued to play the part in which I had been cast for the remainder of the tour and I put up with the unwanted political pressure from Judith. She also claimed to be a Buddhist and was being very pushy and un-Buddhist about that too, trying to make me accept the Buddha by bullying tactics! So there was political and religious pressure in the workplace. I don't think it ever occurred to Judith that I might have beliefs of my own. As an ex-Christian with a very broadly "New Age" outlook on life I was quietly thinking "And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward".

Judith Scott left Children's World after that. I carried on into subsequent years playing different characters in various stories. We also had a playbus and parachute games. The children loved what we were doing.

I went to London for an interview to join a course specialising in Drama and Movement Therapy run by a teaching group called Sesame. They were offering Rudolf Laban dance/movement technique, Jungian psychology, psychopathology and the study of symbols within myths, legends and fairy stories. It certainly seemed as though the course was right up my street.

However, the interview was a bit strange and afterwards I didn't really expect to get a place on the course.

I was interviewed by the founder of the Sesame method, Marian Lindquist. She asked about my background experience and I described our work at Children's World, our founder Arabella Churchill (the granddaughter of Winston Churchill), our drama team and the way we worked. I mentioned that we were employed under the terms of the Community Programme which was funded by M.S.C. (Manpower Services Commission), a government department which was attempting to reduce unemployment by creating paid jobs within community based projects.

Marian Lindquist (known to everyone as "Billy") blinked a little wearily at all that information and said "You've got an MSC."

"No," I corrected her, "I haven't got an MSC. The funding for the Community Programme comes from the M.S.C. It stands for Manpower Services Commission."

"No!" insisted Billy, "You've GOT an MSC."

I tried again to explain the meaning of the initials M.S.C. within the context of the Community Programme. Billy was having none of it and kept insisting that I had got an "MSC". I couldn't get her to change her mind on that.

I was very much reminded of a novel by Thomas Berger "Little Big Man" where George Armstrong Custer keeps insisting that Little Big Man is a "mule skinner" and will not take "no" for an answer.

I left the interview feeling that I wasn't going to get a place on the Sesame course because we couldn't even have a sensible conversation without veering off into some fictional version of things. I wasn't too happy about it but there seemed nothing I could do.

I returned to Glastonbury and continued working for Children's World. After King Crackpot we had other stories, a different one each school term. Firstly Mister Hat and the Magic Wishing Well and then The Rainbow Dragons in the final term of 1985. I particularly enjoyed the Rainbow Dragons story because I was able to make puppets of all the characters and reprise all of the episodes and characters in a little puppet theatre which I operated from behind and did all of the voices. It was a major highpoint for me combining the various talents of acting, puppet making, drawing cartoons all in one and bringing to life the story so that the children were able to call out the names of each character as they recognised them. The children had all joined in and enjoyed what we were doing. It was a great success.

Then, to my surprise, I got a letter from Sesame Drama and Movement to inform me that I had been granted a place on the Sesame course two years in the future: September 1987. In the meantime I had to get through a year (1985-1986) of unemployment, jobseeking and doing unpaid volunteer work for Mendip District Council Social Services and Beckery Adult Training Centre followed by a second year (1986-1987) on the Community Programme with Children's World. I say "had to get through" but it was a great time doing some of the most rewarding work I've ever done in my life.

I was living in a flat at number 7a The High Street, Glastonbury. It was one of several flats located upstairs from a High Street shop called "Gothic Image". I lived there from 1984 to 1987 through some very difficult times. Glastonbury was becoming increasingly the target of violent drug dealing gangs and I was beaten up several times for saying "No!" to their products. I wasn't against other people taking drugs if they wanted to. That was their own business. I simply objected to them trying to make me have it.

They were strange times in 7a. There were people dressed in black who would play a tape of "Bela Lugosi's Dead" on an almost endless loop and who would sit on the landing giggling and talking about "roof rabbits". There were drug dealing thugs disguised as "New Age" travellers. There were skinheads who walked around shouting "hot knives!" and declaring themselves proudly to be homosexuals. There were arty intellectuals and rainbow-clad hippies wandering in and out at all hours.

When the drug dealers came into the building they occupied the communal areas such as the stairs, corridors and kitchen. They sat there smoking dope and laughing as I ran around with an improvised gasmask covering my face and began opening windows to allow fresh air to blow away the drug smoke.

One woman stood and watched with her arms folded as her drug dealer friend punched me in the head for flushing his cannabis joint down the toilet. I had blood running down my forehead and I suppose I was in a state of shock/concussion because I remember raising my right hand in a "thumbs up" gesture and then dramatically turning it into a "thumbs down". Goodness knows what that was supposed to achieve but the brain works differently when in shock.

The same woman, a few days later, knocked on the door of my room and asked "Do you want to go to bed with me?" Shocked, I replied, "No, of course not!" She responded by saying that that was an insult and went back to her own flat.

The same drug dealer who had punched me before attacked me again on the landing, knocking me down on the floor and standing over me shouting "He's got something wrong with him! He's got something wrong with him! He's got something wrong with him!" over and over until Verity (known as Tabby) came out of the flat she shared with her boyfriend Steve and put her arms around my shoulders as if to protect me from the attack. At the sight of this The drug dealing maniac backed away saying "Okay, alright, yeah, get some loving, yeah, okay..."

I told Tabby to just leave it and I went out for a walk.

Life was very difficult during that period. I was doing unpaid volunteer work for Mendip District Council Social Services with children and adults who had learning disabilities and I definitely didn't want my brain all clouded up by unwanted drug smoke from these fascist bastards. I had explained to them repeatedly that I didn't care if they wanted to destroy their own brains with drugs but that I had a right to say NO to them forcing their "nazi bloody smoke" into my lungs.

Interestingly I found that I could make people stop attacking me simply by telling them that I was no longer a pacifist. I didn't need to prove it by having a fight with anybody. Simply saying that I wasn't a pacifist was enough, it seemed. That's an interesting bit of human psychology. Nevertheless it was true. I had genuinely given up pacifism but it wasn't because of being continually attacked. It was because I had belatedly realised that my dad's generation fighting in the war against the Nazis was necessary and that Mahatma Gandhi couldn't have stopped Hitler. I'm sure I could've realised this a lot sooner if I hadn't spent six and a half years being brainwashed and mind numb-ified by a pseudo-religious cult between spring 1974 and autumn 1980. But that's a story for another time.

There was a difficult time in February 1987 for everyone in the building. Stephen Davie, the man who lived in the flat next door to me, killed his girlfriend Verity while they were both out of their heads on drugs.

On a Sunday morning he came to me to confess and asked me to help him to surrender himself to the police. I walked with him to the police station in Benedict Street but the station was closed on Sundays. I used the emergency telephone on the front of the building to call through to the nearest open police station which was in Wells.

The police car came from Wells and Steve surrendered to them. I went with the police to the flats and showed them which flat he lived in. One police officer stayed with me on the landing while the other one went into the flat. He re-emerged moments later and confirmed that it wasn't a hoax and that there was, indeed, a dead body in there. They locked up the flat and I went back to the police station with them to make my witness statement.

Over the next few days police forensic people in white zip-up coveralls removed the body and cleaned everything out of the flat. It was a traumatic time for everyone at 7a. Still, we got through it.

The landlord wanted to get someone into the flat as soon as possible rather than have an empty room with a bad vibe hanging over it. So the tenancy was taken over by a woman who was about eight months pregnant and, when she gave birth a month later, all of the Glastonbury people said that the new birth had put a positive life affirming vibe there instead of the death vibe.

I continued working for Arabella at Children's World and in June I was on site crew for the Glastonbury Festival Theatre Area.

In September I had moved from Glastonbury to London again and was ready to begin studying at the Central School of Speech and Drama where the Sesame course was based. However, there was a problem. The solicitor for the case of Stephen Davey's murder of his girlfriend Verity was calling me to appear as a witness on the same day that the Sesame course commenced.

It was not a coincidence. The police had written to me asking if there was any day which would be inconvenient for me to appear. Like a fool I imagined that they were trying to be

helpful. I wrote back telling them which day would be the most inconvenient and, sure enough, that's the day they called me on!

A week before the Sesame course was due to begin I took a letter by hand to the Central School in Swiss Cottage and found the office of Pat, the Course Tutor. Pat wasn't in her office but her assistant was there so I explained the contents of the letter and reason why I had to miss the first day of the Sesame course to give my evidence in the Bristol court. I travelled down to Bristol on the train and arrived at the court twenty minutes earlier than the time the solicitors' letter had specified. The proceedings had already begun and I was not permitted to enter the court. I told the court usher that I was called as a witness and showed him the letter. He told me to wait outside until I was called. This prevented me from knowing what other witnesses were saying.

Eventually I was called and I entered the witness box and gave my evidence. Steve was convicted and he went to prison.

I joined the Sesame course on the Tuesday and met my fellow students. There were initially 14 of us on the course but during the year one student dropped out and so there were 13. Three men and ten women. The age range spanned 26 years from the youngest at 21 to the eldest at 47. I was 34 so I was halfway through the age range with a span of 13 years between me and the youngest and another 13 years between me and the eldest. The number 13 was coming up more often than it should.

The first unusual thing that happened was that 3 of the female students wanted me to agree with their hate campaign against the music tutor who had, apparently, insulted the woman from Cornwall (who was a folk singer) by calling her "Daisy, Daisy".

Since I had never met the music teacher I couldn't agree to join in a hate campaign against her. This rationalistic attitude put me on the wrong side of these several students and I could feel their disgust at my wanton use of simple reasonableness.

In the quietness of my own mind I wondered what was actually wrong with being called "Daisy, Daisy". Perhaps it was necessary to hear the phrase used in context in order to get the insult?

By the Thursday of the first week I was feeling increasingly out of step with the group. Thursday's session put the absolute tin lid on it. Thursday was our first Laban movement session with the dance tutor Suzie.

Suzie held her dance and movement sessions in a church hall belonging to Saint Saviour's. Her first session was very basic indeed, reminding me of "Music and Movement" class in junior school when I was six. All the usual forms of movement, finding our own space, assuming different shapes, spreading our bodies out to be as open as possible etc.

After living in Glastonbury for several years I already had a lot of experience of attending dance classes and creative group activities and I had also attended Marie Weir's Laban classes in Bristol for several months. The problem began when we were asked to each make our own sound, going "Ahhh" or "Mmmmm" or "Eeeeeee" or whatever with the intention

of all the different sounds blending into one combined “group sound”. One person started us off, then I added my different sound to that and then everyone else in the group copied the exact sound that the first person had made. Leaving me as the only different one. I knew I had been stitched-up and I wasn’t surprised. Things had been leaning that way from the start.

Next, Suzie wanted us to all adopt the posture and movement characteristics of a “villain” character, a “bad” person, a criminal. We had a few minutes to decide how we were going to interpret that idea in physical movement.

I was aware of the politics of physical body types. I knew that Nabil Shaban and David Rappaport had both spoken out against “body fascism”, the portrayal of twisted or non-standard body types as “negative” or “bad”. And I also knew that these stereotypes had a history of being used by racists and antisemites in contrast to the stereotypes of “good” characters who were supposed to look like Greek Gods or some sort of perfect, upright straightness.

So I decided that the only way to do the exercise without falling into that body fascist stereotyping was to reverse it. I made up my mind that my interpretation of the “villain” character would be a confidence trickster. A criminal who walks upright, perfectly straight with a smile on his face and an air of confidence. A smooth operator, a sly villain who wins everyone over with his apparent honesty.

Walking around the space inside the church hall in that confidence trickster character I saw that every other person in the group had gone for crook-backed Richard the Third combined with the Hunchback of Notre Dame. “Oh dear,” I thought.

Next, Suzie wanted us to play the opposite character, the “good” or heroic person. Inevitably I played the “good” person as a man who, through absolutely no fault of his own, had a crooked, twisted body. Equally inevitable was everyone else’s portrayal of the “good” character as straight and upright.

Right up until the end of the exercise I genuinely believed that Suzie was going to tell everyone that they were wrong and that only I had got it right.

Of course I was over-estimating the intellectual level of the course I was on and Suzie said that everyone else had got it right and that I was the only one who had got it wrong. It was still only the first week of the course and I already knew, with absolute certainty, that I wasn’t going to get the Sesame certificate at the end of the course. I was banjaxed, as Terry Wogan used to say.

Still, even knowing that I was on a course that I could never pass, I still enjoyed a year of studying Carl Jung, Sigmund Freud, Psychopathology, Rudolf Laban and of course Sesame’s star attraction the analysis of “Myths, Legends and Fairy Stories” as a means of self discovery. It was fun and even though I found that I was being increasingly scapegoated by the other students, even that was fun because I was studying the psychology of group scapegoating from inside the scapegoat viewpoint. It was very enlightening.

One of the really annoying things about the Sesame group was that people there kept referring to the murder of Verity by Stephen Davie as “a real life murder mystery” in a tone of voice which suggested that they either didn’t believe it was true or thought it was exciting (or perhaps both). I kept telling them that it wasn’t a “mystery”. Steve had immediately surrendered himself to the police. Therefore there wasn’t any “mystery”. Nevertheless, my fellow Sesame students all seemed to believe that murder has to be a “mystery”. I tried to explain to them that it was just a horrible tragic traumatic situation. Nothing else.

So I kept at it, throughout the whole year, and reached the end with a far greater amount of knowledge and experience to add to what I’d gained in Glastonbury and elsewhere. I didn’t get the Sesame certificate but I wasn’t surprised. Pat, the Course Tutor, kept telling me to “tune in”. “Tune in with the group Pete,” she would say, “Tune in with the group”.

The Sesame philosophy valued getting everyone onto the same wavelength like a herd of sheep, while I valued developing the individuality of each human being. Sesame dreamed of a world where everyone was “tuned in” to each other whereas I dreamed of a world where seven or eight billion people could have seven or eight billion different points of view. We were never going to see eye-to-eye.

When the course was over in the summer of 1988 I returned to Somerset and took an unpaid volunteer job at an animal sanctuary near Langport. I spent the next couple of years learning about cows and goats and sheep, horses, ducks and chickens, cats and dogs and rabbits etc.

I sprayed sheep’s bottoms with gentian violet and tetracycline, fed the animals, mucked out the animals, got up at the crack of dawn in the middle of winter to walk up the yard with a big stick and break the ice on the cow troughs and generally learned as much as I could about caring for animals.

Under the influence and advice of Francesca D’Silva I became a vegan and have remained vegan ever since.

I did the MENSA I.Q. test and discovered that my I.Q. measured 160. This gave me the confidence to think about university. Eventually I moved back to Glastonbury, worked for Arabella Churchill at Children’s World again and started gaining the necessary qualifications to go to university as a mature student.

Life goes on.....